

“They Knew”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Reflection for the 1st Sunday of Easter

Matthew 28

April 16, 2017

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look! There was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord, having descended out of heaven and having rolled back the stone, was sitting on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. Terrified of him, the guards quaked and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn’t here. He’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, look at the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. Look! He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ Look! This is my message to you.”

With great fear and great joy, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. Look! Jesus met them, and said “Hello!” They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. There they will see me.”

Now as the women were on their way . . . Look! Some of the guards came into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. The priests met with the elders and decided to give a large sum of money to the soldiers. They told them, “Say that Jesus’ disciples came at night and stole his body while you were sleeping. And if the governor hears about this, we will take care of it so you will have nothing to worry about.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were told. And this report has continued to spread throughout all Judea.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look! I myself will be with you every day until the completion of this age.”

Matthew 28, Common English Bible (adapted)

You might notice that Matthew’s telling of the resurrection and its aftermath emphasizes the importance of seeing. Again and again, we’re told to “look!” (or “behold.”) By looking, we can discover new things. With Jesus’ resurrection, God shows us things that challenge what we are sure we know.

I

That morning, they knew. . . . Sabbath was over. Rest was finished. The sunrise was screaming like an alarm clock. Time to get up. Time to get back to work. Time to put down the dream, once and for all, and face the terrible, numbing ordinary. They knew all this.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. God crashed the sacred into the secular. God burst the ordinary with the wonderful.

But they knew. . . . Friday had ended too early, with just enough time to shut him in the tomb. So they had work to do. They needed to honour their friend, and say good-bye properly. Everything they needed had sat by the door through Saturday. Now, they would finish things. They knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. God unravelled their arrangements. God declared their preparations surplus.

But they knew. . . . No one would listen. The witness of women was unreliable. They were not heard. They were not believed. They knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. God sent the angel with the news to *them*. The Saviour showed himself to *them*. And told *them* to go. Gave *them* the mission. Sent *them* — those women! — as the first apostles.

They were sure of what they knew. But God knew better!

What are you sure that you know?

II

Meanwhile, that morning the guards knew. . . . Securing a cemetery? There was no traffic. The stone was shut. The tomb was sealed. The mob that had followed this so-called messiah? First sign of trouble, and they'd run off. They weren't going to try anything. Easiest! Mission! Ever! They knew!

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. They guards were set to keep everyone out. But God would not keep Jesus in.

But they knew. . . . God had abandoned Jesus. Why else would God have let him be condemned like that? Mocked like that? Beaten like that? Crucified like that? Shamed like that? Forsaken like that? Destroyed like that? Where was God? Not with Jesus! They knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. God shook the earth, dispatched the

angel, rolled the stone. Of course, Jesus had already got up and gone.¹ No one saw the resurrection itself. All this display, God did for them, and for us. So we'd see that God is not silent. God has the last word.² With his resurrection, God proves Jesus.

Those guards were sure of what they knew. But God knew better!

What are you sure that you know?

III

Meanwhile, the conspirators knew. . . . They would cover it up. Sow some money, spread some rumours, and it would go away. People will buy anything, if it lets them keep their tightly packed world intact, their closely held truths in place. They'll fall into line. They won't ask questions, not if they don't want the answers. The cover-up conspirators knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. Within hours, word was out. There was no keeping it quiet. The conspirators would soon be gone and forgotten. Jesus is still alive.

But they knew. . . . It's monarchs and armies, empires and security states, presidents and prime ministers, parliaments and congresses, voters and taxpayers that run the world. Whatever your system is, you know who is sovereign in it. They knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. Empires will fall. Armies will flee. Regimes will cannibalize themselves. Democracies will wither. But God's justice and peace, God's righteousness and truth spreads through the land, over seas, around the world, and nothing stops it.

Those authorities were sure of what they knew. But God knew better!

What are you sure that you know?

IV

Meanwhile, Jesus' followers, those who hadn't the courage to go to his tomb that morning, they knew. . . . They were finished. They had been tested, and it had broken them open. What they saw inside was gross. One had betrayed him, bargaining a kiss for coins. One had denied him, exchanging bluster for lies. They had all left him, scurrying back into darkness. How could they ever come out again? They were finished. They knew.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus does not give up on faithless

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 2, The Churchbook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 781.

² N. T. Wright, Matthew for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 198.

followers. “Go tell them,” the angel commanded the women. “Go tell my brothers,” Jesus smiled. His brothers. His sisters. His family. Jesus forgives us and invites us, again, and again, and again. He says, “Follow me.”

But they knew. . . . They had to see. “Let us see the vacated grave! Let us see him alive.” Except, when they did see, when they went to Galilee where Jesus said to go, when they met him there, when they saw him, when they worshipped him . . . some, were still doubting.

God knew better! God raised Jesus from the dead. And Jesus, crucified by the authorities, proves to have all authority. All God’s authority, everywhere. And he sends them. He sends doubting disciples. *“Go! Make followers! Baptize! Teach!” “Go, and remember. I am with you, always.”*

Those disciples were sure of what they knew. But God knew better!

What are you sure that you know?

V

The women at the tomb were sure they knew. The guards were sure they knew. The authorities were sure they knew. All Jesus’s followers were sure they knew. They were all sure about how the world works. They were all sure about what power looks like. They were all sure about themselves, the good and the bad. They were all sure about God.

But Jesus’ resurrection shows that they did not have a clue — about the world, about power, about themselves, about God. Not when what they “knew” set limits on what God will do.

What are you so sure about? What are you absolutely convinced of? If your certainties, and if your convictions box-in what God will do . . . be ready. Be ready to have them all blown-open by God. Do not be surprised when God surprises you.

God raised Jesus, not to prove a point — though Jesus’ resurrection shows us many things. God raised Jesus, not as some cosmic “tah dah!” — though it is a delightful surprise. God raised Jesus, not to confound our expectations — though it certainly does that.

God raised Jesus because this world groaning in grief, needs a re-creation. God raised Jesus because we are stuck in death, and need life. God has launched a rescue-mission. Not to wipe it all out. Not to take us away from it. To make it all new, all alive. God is healing the wounded. God is binding up the broken. God is mending the fragmented. God is forgiving the sinful. God is making peaceful the violent. God is confounding and changing the oppressor. God is setting the captives free. In Jesus, God has started this. In his life, his death, and his resurrection, Jesus began making

this happen. Now he is sending us — those first disciples, and us disciples — to join in what he is doing for the sake of this world.

All of that is what I'm supposed to say on Easter morning. But I know. It's just wishful thinking. Not realistic at all. I know.

But God knows better.

God raised Jesus from the dead.